

Breaking Skin

Terri Janke

“Sticks and stones will break my bones,
but names will never hurt me.”

My feet are on fire. The tar at the edges of the bitumen road is soft. Grit sticks to my toes, but I don't stop. I keep running. I turn into Spencer Street. The bag of groceries slaps against my legs. I move past the wooden houses on our street. The letterboxes fly by. I soar past a barking dog. Mrs. Francis is moving the sprinkler from the middle of her lawn to the marigold patch. I am gone before she looks up. I am whizzing past Mr. Buchan's shed. He is making a fence. His hammering sounds fade. When I reach our front yard I slow down, and then shift into a fast walk. I don't stop until I am inside the flyscreen door.

“What took you so long?” Mum says.

“Nothing,” I tell her as I put the loaf of bread and can of corned meat on the kitchen table. “If I had a bike I'd be faster. It's not fair. All the other kids have bikes.”

“Wash your hands and do the onions.” Mum opens the canned meat.

I peel away the onion's outer brown skin. My eyes sting.

The world is not a fair place. Why don't I have a bike? My brother has a dragster that was given to him by his godfather. My sister has a maroon bike that was given to her by an older cousin. I ride my sister's bike sometimes, when she's not around. She gets real mad if she finds out.

Dad comes home in the afternoon with a battered-up bike. The wheels are wonky and the paint is peeling off.

“Here, this is for you,” he tells me.

“But it’s old and rusty,” I say.

“Yeah, I know, I found it at the dump.” He is always picking up things at the local dump. He spends hours looking at other people’s garbage. Of course, he is going to make them as good as new. We have a shed full of other people’s bits of wood and clapped-out appliances. There is no room to swing a hula hoop in between the broken radios, shelves, and crates that are falling apart. “You never know when they will come in handy,” he will say.

Dad strokes the frame of the bike. “Don’t worry, I’ll fix it good as new with a coat of paint.”

I point to the ailing saddle. “The seat’s broken.”

He shakes his head once. “I’ll get a new one. Just you wait and see, it will look like it came brand-new from the shop.”

Something in my face must show I have my doubts. Dad lays the bike down and crouches down to my level.

“I used to have a red bike when I was a kid, rode it everywhere, long distances, too. I rode all day, on the railway tracks, off the cliff into the Babinda Creek, right into the water.”

I laugh. “You’re a real doogie.”

“Every kid must have a bike,” he pats my head. “We’ll make it so you are proud of it.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

That weekend we paint the bicycle blue, the color of the midday sky. After the paint dries, Dad screws on the new seat. Later, I ride down the street. I ride it to the shops, to the park, and over to my cousin’s house and back home again.

My sister is ten and she is having a party. The house is filled with party food, disco music, and streamers everywhere. Girls arrive with prettily wrapped presents.

“I’m just going for a quick ride on the bike,” I say. I push my bike out of the driveway. Slowly, I head up the path to the top of the hill. I like riding up a hill and sailing back down again, real fast, without having to pedal. The slope is slow at first, and

then as I go down, it gets steeper and I pick up speed on the way. Just up and back once more, I say to myself. Then I'll go back to the party.

A boy in a yellow T-shirt appears over the top of the hill. I can see his is a racing bike and even from this distance I can tell it's one of those bikes with the fancy gears and brakes fitted onto the handlebars. I recognize him straight away. He is a big boy who goes to the high school across the main street. And he is coming toward me at a cracking pace, so fast I have to brake suddenly to miss crashing into him.

"Watch it," he hisses, "Black Buddha." I look at his tight mouth and the pimples on his chin. I want to ask him what a Buddha is, but I am too scared. He blocks the path and will not let me pass.

"What a stupid old bike!" he says. I edge my way around and in front of him. Then, I imagine I am flying and make my feet churn round and round on the pedals. The trees are going by fast, then they're just a green blur. One split second later, I am lying on my back. I have hit an open concrete drain. I want to get up. My body hurts.

The boy catches up with me. He looks at my arm. His nose twists like a rat's.

"Your bone is poking through, it's so white and your skin's so black," he says. I begin to cry. I can't move and I won't ask him for help. He snorts, says something I can't quite hear and leaves.

Several minutes later, I hear my mother's voice.

"Oh my God, I hope it's not broken."

She helps me up and walks me back to our house, holding my arm close to my chest. Red blood has soaked my scratch-and-sniff apple T-shirt. Dad drives me to the hospital. Along the way he sees one of his mates walking on the side of the road.

"Need a lift?" he asks.

"Yes." His mate hops in the car, next to me.

"I'm taking my daughter to the hospital," says Dad.

Dad's friend is well mannered. He doesn't say anything about the blood he can see all over me, all over the car.

We drop Dad's friend at his house and then drive on to the hospital.

I sit holding my arm close to my body while Dad fills in the forms. The doctor explains that he has to pull my arm so that the bone will pop back in. Dad comforts me by

telling me jokes. I laugh, but he's not really funny. My laughter encourages him to say more. The stitches are big and the white plaster is bloody, even before I get home. The party is over. Mum has saved me a piece of cake. I am so hungry, but I can't eat properly with my left hand.

Mum has dragged the bike home. The steering is out of whack. I stand with the bike propped against my side. To go straight I have to turn the wheel to the right.

For twelve weeks I wear the cast of plaster. It is replaced twice and the kids at school write their names on it. When the plaster comes off, my arm has a scar and it shines like a two-cent piece.

"Do you wanna come for a ride?" my sister asks.

I shrug my shoulders. "My bike's totally broken," I say.

But it doesn't matter anyway. I never want to ride a bike again.

"Happy tenth birthday!" Mum says. "Close your eyes." She leads me to the garage.

"Okay." She turns me around.

I can open my eyes now. My father is standing next to a dragster with a sparkly pink seat and a shiny bell. "This has got to be the snazziest bike in the whole neighborhood. What do you reckon?" says my father.

My feet don't move.

"Have a go," urges Dad.

My mouth drops.

"What's wrong?" says Mum.

I hold up my arm and point to the shiny two-cent skin.

"The doctor says I'll always have this scar."

My mother's hands reach for my shoulder. "That scar on your arm will make you strong. Strong enough to heal the scars you can't see."

I wriggle away from her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've got to get back on the bike. It's time you started riding again," she says.

Dad helps me onto the smooth seat. My feet grip the pedals. The handlebars are in just the right position. I ride out into the world. The bell tinkles. If skin could speak, my skin would sing.

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